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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MUMBAI 001261

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SUBJECT: MAHARASHTRA POLICE UPDATE ON ISLAMIC TERRORISM IN WESTERN INDIA

REF: A: NEW DELHI 3835; B: MUMBAI 847; C. MUMBAI 890

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Mumbai, State.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

#### Summary

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¶1. (C) A top Maharashtra anti-terrorist official has told us that the three suspected terrorists killed in the foiled June 1 attack on the RSS headquarters in Nagpur were probably foreigners. J.J. Singh, Additional Chief of Police in the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS), also acknowledged that the Nagpur incident might be connected to the earlier seizure of weapons and arrests of nine persons in other cities in Maharashtra, and to the bombing of a Gujarat train station in February. Singh said that the young Muslim men arrested in connection with the weapons seizure were a sleeper cell of couriers. Some of the men had received training abroad, and the modus operandi pointed towards a Pakistan or Kashmir connection, but the ATS had no clear evidence of such a linkage, he said. Sleeper cells in Maharashtra's large and diverse Muslim community had become the "biggest headache" for the state's anti-terrorist police, Singh said. The recent events in Maharashtra and Gujarat were not, in his view, necessarily a sign that Islamic terrorism was on the rise in western India. Terrorists needed only a few local contacts to provide logistics for their operation, he said. The incidents were more likely a signal that outside groups were becoming more successful in tapping existing resentments, which ran high among Muslims in western India, to recruit young men to act as couriers or to provide logistical support. Singh and local Muslim leaders told us that the 2002 carnage in Gujarat had become a rallying cry for terrorist recruiters infiltrating Muslim communities in western India. Singh described the recruitment and training process in some detail. He said madrassas had become a common recruiting ground, where the recruiting process was so subtle that many poorly educated and impressionable young men did not

realize that they were being targeted. End summary.

Were RSS Attackers Foreigners?

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12. (C) J.J. Singh, Additional Chief of Police in the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS), told Congen officers on June 22 that Indian authorities believe the three suspected terrorists killed in the foiled June 1 raid on the RSS headquarters in Nagpur (Ref A) were foreigners. If they had been residents of India, the police would expect someone to come forth to collect the remains, or the bodies would match the description of persons missing somewhere in India, Singh said. The attackers carried no identification, and forensic tests had not linked the bodies to those of known missing persons. Singh would not speculate on their nationality, but said they were of south Asian origin.

13. (C) Singh acknowledged that the weapons found in Nagpur were identical to the weapons seized in Aurangabad and Malegaon in May (Refs B, C). Investigators in the seizures believed that terrorist operatives got away with some weapons, yet the police had no direct evidence connecting the Nagpur weapons to the two seizures. He cautioned about jumping to conclusions about a linkage, pointing out that assault rifles and hand grenades like those found in Nagpur and Aurangabad had been used in other terrorist attacks elsewhere in India. He did acknowledge, however, that the modus operandi in both cases was so similar that a link was not unlikely.

Detainees Speak Openly

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14. (C) Singh said the ATS had kept the nine persons arrested in

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Aurangabad and Malegaon under surveillance and monitored their phone calls for several weeks. Many of those arrested were now speaking freely with interrogators. The police now believed that the men, all young Muslims, were a sleeper cell of couriers. Sleeper cells were becoming the ATS's "biggest headache," he said. The police assumed that similar sleeper cells existed in Aurangabad and elsewhere in western India. About half of the suspects were educated, the remaining were what Singh called semi-literate "blue collar" poor. Some had received training in either Pakistan or Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, where they had traveled via the Gulf, Nepal or Bangladesh. The group appeared to know little about their mission, despite the foreign training and travel. Nor were they able to give investigators solid leads to those who were actually behind the operation. He called the recruitment process and the weapons run highly professional, "polished" operations, as documented by the compartmentalized information of the couriers and the quality and packaging of the weapons into individual terrorist "kits" consisting of an AK-46/T-56 rifle, 4 magazines, 200 rounds of ammunition, 3 hand grenades and 3 kg of RDX explosives.

Terrorists Trained in Pakistan or Kashmir?

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15. (C) Investigators did not know the final destination of the weapons seized in Aurangabad, or their source country. He said the authorities had leads on the perpetrators and their intended targets, but he refused to elaborate. He did acknowledge, however, that the training received by the young arrestees pointed towards what he called a "PoK" or Pakistan or Kashmir connection. (Note: In a separate conversation, Sundeep Waslekar, President of the Strategic Foresight Group, a Mumbai think tank, said he's convinced that the attacks have a Pakistan connection. Waslekar told us that, several years ago, the Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) modified its strategy of supporting terror groups operating out of Kashmir. ISI was now helping Kashmiri terrorists extend

beyond Kashmir into the Indian heartland. Waslekar said he had no reason to believe that the ISI itself was directly behind the Gujarat and Nagpur attacks. More likely, the ISI trained and outfitted Kashmiri groups to carry out such attacks on their own, he said. End note.)

#### Aurangabad Arrests Linked to Gujarat Bombing?

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¶16. (C) The group arrested in Aurangabad may also be connected to the February 19 bombing at a train station in Kalapur, Gujarat, which injured at least 25 persons. Singh confirmed media reports that the Maharashtra ATS recently transferred two of the suspects to the Gujarat ATS for questioning in connection with the Kalapur bombing. Investigators had discovered that the two had information of possible relevance to the investigation in Gujarat. However, Singh stressed that the Maharashtra police did not have clear evidence firmly linking the Aurangabad and Gujarat events.

¶17. (C) Singh said the police still had no motive for the Kalapur bombing. In the days following the incident, the media cited intelligence sources as claiming that the bomb, hidden in a suitcase, was actually meant to explode at Mumbai Central Station, but was inadvertently removed from a train at an earlier stop in Kalapur. Recently the media quoted Gujarat police source as saying that the bomb was in fact intended for Kalapur. Singh disagreed with the conclusion of his colleagues in Gujarat, however, saying that investigators still didn't have enough information to draw firm conclusions.

#### A New Terrorism Trend in Western India?

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¶18. (C) Singh doubted whether the three incidents signaled a new

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trend towards Islamic terrorism in the western Indian heartland. The incidents may simply be a sign of external groups' improved ability to use local Muslim communities as instruments for their purposes, he said. Singh said the police believe that the terrorist presence in Maharashtra consisted mainly of sleeper cells for courier operations. The actual operatives normally came from elsewhere. Terrorists needed only a handful of local operatives; these were always easy to find in any large Muslim community, he said. The vast majority of Muslims did not support terrorism, Singh said. He estimated that "99 percent" of Shia Muslims, a minority among Muslims in western India, were opposed to terrorism, as were as the vast majority of Sunni Bareli Muslims. Subgroups within the Deobandi sect of Sunni Muslims provided the most fertile soil for recruiting young men into terrorist operations. The influence of the Ahl-e-Hadeeth movements was growing as well, Singh said.

¶19. (C) Singh placed Muslim extremists in western India into two groups. About half were true zealots, he said. The rest were disaffected youth. The severe economic disparity between Muslims and the Hindu majority had created an environment that extremists were actively exploiting. In addition, the Gujarat massacres of 2002 had become a rallying point for many Muslims, much like Indira Gandhi's storming of the Golden Temple had become a catalyst for Sikh terrorism in the 1980s. Recruiters harkened on the images of the massacre to recruit young, impressionable Muslims.

#### Muslim Views on Terror Sympathies in Their Communities

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¶10. (C) In separate conversations, leading members of Mumbai's Muslim community also said that Gujarat had become a rallying cry for disaffected young. Mohib Nassar, a Mumbai-based businessman and respected member of the city's Shia community, said most Muslims were appalled by terrorist acts committed

under the name of Islam, yet estimated that "about 20 percent" of the city's Sunni Muslims, mostly Deobandis, openly sympathized with Islamic terrorism around the world. He claimed that terrorist groups from both Kashmir and Arab countries were actively seeking to get a foothold in the city's Deobandi community. Majid Memon, a respected Sunni trial lawyer and human rights activist, told us that most Muslims felt a growing sense of humiliation that grew out of discrimination and denial of opportunity in Indian society. Terrorist recruiters tapped into this sense of humiliation to recruit young, impressionable men. Memon said many in his community refused to believe that Muslims were actually behind the attack on the RSS headquarters.

Naseem Khan, a deputy in the Maharashtra state parliament, said that Muslims were also feeling increasingly threatened by the Hindu majority. Young men could easily be recruited by a "call to arms" to defend the community against a perceived outside threat posed by the Hindu majority.

#### Foreign Training

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¶11. (C) Singh said terrorist recruits looked for young, semi-educated men as their "raw material." Recruiters would identify boys with the particular qualities needed to be couriers or operatives. The foreign training that the Aurangabad arrestees received was common. Many young men, once identified as potential operatives, were sent to the Gulf to work, where they were mentored and developed. Often the young men were unaware that they were being screened. Those with less potential would be dropped to look after themselves, while others were sent to Pakistan or Kashmir for training. The men received about six weeks of training; those who showed particular promise received an additional nine months. (Note: Singh said that terrorist operatives received more training than many of his ATS officers. End note.)

#### Madrassas: Recruitment Ground For Terrorists

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¶12. (C) Singh said madrassas were a common recruiting platform for terrorists. The number of madrassas in Maharashtra was increasing rapidly, he said. Both state education and security services found it impossible to keep track of all of them. Many madrassas were simply a single room where boys and young men spent entire days alone with a single teacher. A boy's development depended much on the teacher, who could spend many formative years with young boys and men and became an important figure of authority in their lives. A madrassa could change from good to bad, or vice versa, with a change of the teacher, Singh said. Most new teaching recruits come to Maharashtra, a relatively developed state, from the poorer states of India such as Bihar and UP. The police are also noting an increasing number of teachers from African and Arabian countries, Singh said.

¶13. (C) The identification and recruitment in madrassas was so subtle that many of the young men did not realize they were being recruited. Many young men are recruited by persons asking them to "do something positive for the community," or to "act as good Muslims." Those approached were normally so limited in their horizons, so impressionable and had so many figures of authority around them asking them to do good things that they followed without question, Singh said. Many of those in sleeper cells do not even realize that they are part of a larger organization.

#### Comment

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¶14. (C) Singh was careful not to make any formal linkages between the events of Nagpur, Aurangabad and Kalapur in the

absence of formal evidence, yet it was clear from his description of the incidents that the ATS assumes that they are all in fact interconnected. His balanced assessment of the terrorist threat emanating from western India's Muslim community, and his description of the mood among Muslims, matches closely what we hear from Muslim leaders. Both the police and Muslim leaders tell us that Muslim communities in western India appear, at the moment, to serve primarily as logistics hubs for the operations of outside groups. They believe that home-grown Islamic terrorism is less of a threat. Our interlocutors agree in their assessment of what must be done to ensure that indigenous Islamic terrorism does not grow roots in the region: Muslim communities must do more to ensure that their children receive a modern, high quality education, and government at all levels must work with the communities and civil society to address the denial of opportunity that is the seed for the anger and animosities that exist in the minds of many young Muslims in the region. End comment.

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